

# Cultural Structure of Solar Terms and Traditional Festivals

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**Abstract:** Solar terms and festivals differ from and relate to each other in terms of application scope and cultural structure. The cultural association and application of the 24 Solar Terms are studied in the areas including philosophy, farming and society, and are exhibited in the natural convergence of views on space and time, life and customs, as well as the facilitation of agricultural practice. The connotations of traditional Chinese festivals concern basic areas such as beliefs, rites, language, symbols, diets and art, which are exhibited in the co-existent “festival tokens,” “festival events,” “festival messages,” “festival symbols,” “festival food” and “festival art forms.” Festivals feature fixed and periodic occurrence and multi-channel cultural inheritance.

**Keywords:** solar term; traditional festival; connotative space; application area; cultural structure

In November 2016, China's 24 Solar Terms were officially inscribed by the UNESCO on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (ICH List). Since then, solar terms and traditional Chinese festivals have been the focus of public attention. How do solar terms and festivals differ from and relate to each other? What are their cultural applications and cultural structure? Only when answers to these two questions are found can people have an in-depth understanding and a clear judgment of “solar terms” and “traditional festivals.”

## 1. The definitions of “solar terms” and “traditional festivals”

Solar terms refer to the entire or part of the 24 Solar Terms. The 24 Solar Terms are based on the changes of the sun's position in the zodiac throughout the year and

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the points are spaced 15° apart along the ecliptic. It includes 12 “month initials” and 12 “month midpoints.” The 12 “month initials” respectively are the Beginning of Spring (*Lichun*), the Insects Awakening (*Jingzhe*), the Fresh Green (*Qingming*), the Beginning of Summer (*Lixia*), the Grain in Ear (*Mangzhong*), the Lesser Heat (*Xiaoshu*), the Beginning of Autumn (*Liqiu*), the White Dew (*Bailu*), the Cold Dew (*Hanlu*), the Beginning of Winter (*Lidong*), the Heavy Snow (*Daxue*) and the Lesser Cold (*Xiaohan*). The 12 “month midpoints” respectively are the Rain Water (*Yushui*), the Spring Equinox (*Chunfen*), the Grain Rain (*Guyu*), the Lesser Fullness (*Xiaoman*), the Summer Solstice (*Xiazhi*), the Greater Heat (*Dashu*), the End of Heat (*Chushu*), the Autumnal Equinox (*Qiufen*), the First Frost (*Shuangjiang*), the Light Snow (*Xiaoxue*), the Winter Solstice (*Dongzhi*) and the Greater Cold (*Dahan*). As abovementioned, the 12 “month initials” and the 12 “month midpoints” are called the 24 Solar Terms.

By the Shang Dynasty (1600 BC-1046 BC), China already had the division of four “month midpoints,” including two Equinoxes (the Spring Equinox & the Autumnal Equinox) and two Solstices (the Summer Solstice & the Winter Solstice). In “Canon of Yao,” *Book of Documents*, there was mentioning of “Rizhong,” “Riyong,” “Xiaozhong” and “Riduan,” which exactly referred to the Spring Equinox, the Summer Solstice, the Autumnal Equinox and the Winter Solstice.<sup>①</sup> In the last stage of the Warring States Period (221BC-5 BC), there had already been mentioning of “eight points” in the *Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals*, forming the concept of “four seasons and eight seasonal points.” The entire 24 Solar Terms were included in *Huainanzi* in the early years of the

Western Han Dynasty (202 BC- 8AD).<sup>②</sup>

The existing 24 Solar Terms derived their names based on the following considerations. First, eight terms were developed to indicate the change of seasons, i.e. the Beginning of Spring, the Spring Equinox, the Beginning of Summer, the Summer Solstice, the Beginning of Autumn, the Autumnal Equinox, the Beginning of Winter and the Winter Solstice. Second, five terms were developed to mark the change of temperature, i.e. the Lesser Heat, the Greater Heat, the End of Heat, the Lesser Cold and the Greater Cold. Third, seven terms were developed to highlight meteorological features, i.e. the Rain Water, the Grain Rain, the White Dew, the Cold Dew, the First Frost, the Lesser Snow and the Heavy Snow. Fourth, four terms were developed to demonstrate phenological characteristics, i.e. The Insects Awakening, the Fresh Green, the Lesser Fullness and the Grain in Ear. Thus, it can be seen that the 24 Solar Terms, based on a solar calendar, serve the purpose of informing seasonal changes, unveiling phenological phenomena and facilitating agricultural production.

Traditional Chinese festivals here refer to a fixed date which bear special cultural connotations and feature corresponding celebrations. Some festivals are solar calendar-based and come from the 24 Solar Terms such as the Beginning of Spring, the Fresh Green and the Winter Solstice. Others are lunar calendar-based and mark the beginning of a month or the date when the “ordinal number of the month” and the “ordinal number of the date” overlap. More specifically, the first day of the first lunar month is the Chinese New Year’s Day; the first day of the second lunar month is the Zhonghe Festival; the first day of the tenth lunar month is the Winter Clothing

① According to “Canon of Yao,” *Book of Documents*, “When the ‘seven bird stars’ appear in the east, it is right in the mid-spring; when the ‘seven bird stars’ appear in the south, it is right in the mid-summer; when the ‘seven stars’ appear in the west, it is right in the mid-autumn; when the ‘seven stars’ appear in the north, it is right in the mid-winter.” Qiao & Zhu, 1998

② Liu An et al., 1989

Festival; while the third day of the third lunar month is the Shangsi Festival; the fifth day of the fifth lunar month is the Dragon Boat Festival; the seventh day of the seventh lunar month is the Qixi Festival; the ninth day of the ninth lunar month is the Chongyang Festival; etc. Apart from that, there are also festivals on the fifteenth day or the eighth day of certain lunar months, such as the Lantern Festival on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, the Hungry Ghost Festival on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the Xiayuan Festival on the fifteenth day of the tenth lunar month, the Buddha's Birthday on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month, and the Laba Festival on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month.

From a historical perspective, Chinese festivals fall into the categories of traditional festivals and emerging festivals; from a geographic perspective, they fall into the categories of local festivals and foreign festivals (overseas festivals); from a subject perspective, there are two festival categories, i.e. nationwide festivals and ethnic festivals; according to the theme, Chinese festivals are respectively celebrated for agricultural, commemorative, religious and recreational purposes. These festivals are usually attached to folk beliefs, oral traditions, symbolic tokens, dynamic activities, special diets, and unique art forms, etc. which are combined to form a certain cultural chain to present a diversity of recurring cultural features.

Traditional Chinese festivals have five basic characteristics. First, festivals are recurring, vigorous and enduring. Second, they are people-oriented and they belong to the entire ethnicity of a region. Third, they are celebrated in an optimistic, active, healthy and joyous atmosphere. Fourth, they can serve multiple purposes such as understanding, education, organization, choosing, reformation and satisfaction.<sup>①</sup> Fifth, they carry unique symbols

to form iconic seasonal indications. Given these characteristics, emerging festivals (i. e. lobster festival, crab festival, tea festival, plum blossom festival, butterfly appreciation festival, artists festival), which are designed for sales promotion and cultural exchange, are in nature quite different from the traditional festivals this paper studies.

## 2. The extended application of solar terms

The 24 Solar Terms are based on the observation of the sun, with their cultural influence on the areas of philosophy, agricultural production, and society.

Their influence on philosophy mainly remains at the spiritual level. Their significance was gradually extended from astronomical observations to the division of four seasons and the formation of the Suishi concept (solar terms and seasonal change-related concept), and was then shifted to the cultural interpretation of the corresponding four directions (east, south, west, north) and the four seasons (spring, summer, autumn, winter). The association of space with time shaped a worldview and ingrained time with a philosophical mark. Following such an "astronomical observation" tradition, ancient people observed the movement of the sun and the moon. They formulated two different calendar systems, the Chinese "solar calendar" and "lunar calendar." As we all know, any time can be placed within a certain range of space and any space is set within a certain range of time. The traditional Chinese solar and lunar calendars, which are respectively based on the observations of different celestial bodies, are interrelated and compatible. Such a relationship is highlighted in the traditional Chinese calendar, which is a combination of the solar and lunar

① Tao, 2001

calendars. The connotation of this calendar was gradually extended from astronomy to humanity, giving rise to such concepts as “being ruled by heaven” and the “unity of man and heaven.” The time-space connection represented by the solar terms has in fact become a medium that links the natural sciences to the philosophy of life. It is also fair to say that the design and application of the 24 Solar Terms concerns the social sciences (philosophy & humanity) as well as the natural sciences (astronomy).

In terms of agricultural production, it was crop cultivation that drove the compilation and application of the traditional Suishi calendar, which demonstrated Chinese ancestors’ relentless efforts in understanding and transforming nature. Solar terms were gradually developed to satisfy the needs of infant farming during the long-term development of agricultural practices. Through phenological observation, ancient Chinese people noticed the periodic variation of animal migration and plant growth, from which they drew laws for sowing and harvesting. Later, they further noticed that animal migrations and plant growth had a lot to do with weather (or rather, temperature), for which they shifted their focus from phenological observation to meteorological observation. Through long-term observations and practice, they discovered the laws that “the growth of all things depends on the sun” and that “change in temperature results from the sun’s movement between the south and the north”. When the sun moves northward, human shadows get shorter; the weather gets warmer; plants begin to sprout, grow and flourish. When the sun moves southward, human shadows get longer; the weather gets colder; crops and other plants begin to mature and then wither. Eventually, ancient Chinese realized

that it was astronomical phenomena that determined meteorological and phenological phenomena. Thus, the observation and recording of solar and lunar movements laid a basis for the judgment of seasons and the arrangement of agricultural production. Compared with the observations of the lunar movement, the observation of the solar movement and the compiling of the 24 Solar Terms are of more importance to agricultural cultivation. Solar term-related farmer’s proverbs can be found everywhere. Examples include “After the Insects Awakening (*Jingzhe*), farmers are supposed to be busy plowing every day,” “Around the Lesser Fullness (*Xiaoman*), farmers are busy with two major tasks, namely, rice transplanting and wheat threshing,” “Once you have a bowl of noodles to celebrate the coming of the Summer Solstice, daytime gets shorter and shorter,” “When it comes to wheat-sowing, the White Dew (*Bailu*) is too early, the Cold Dew (*Hanlu*) too late. The Autumnal Equinox (*Qiufen*) is the high time,” “Harvest green onions around the First Frost (*Shuangjiang*) before they get dry.”<sup>①</sup> These proverbs show how the 24 Solar Terms are extensively applied to identify seasonal change and help arrange agricultural production.

In social area, the 24 Solar Terms-based Suishi concept triggers sentimental feelings and promote customs and activities. In ancient times, people were deeply impressed by the everlasting celestial body movements and the recurring seasonal changes. They gradually developed a desire to imitate and gradually developed the philosophy that, “Like the ever-moving universe, a man of honor will strive constantly for self-improvement.”<sup>②</sup> Those solar terms, along with the four seasons, have also given rise to many words of wisdom, including but not limited to “The whole year’s work depends on a

① The editorial committee of the folk literature collection of Gaochun County, 1989

② Zhang , 2008

good start in spring,” “From spring to autumn, time flies and waits for no man,” “How can tiny grass like me repay the warmth the sun has cast?” “When it gets cold, crickets crawl into the room. The year-end is approaching. It is better to seek instant gratification, after all, time elapses too quickly.”<sup>①</sup> All of these concern seasonal changes, which are marked by solar terms. Such sentimental depictions of seasonal change not only echo individual attitudes, but also reflect certain social realities. The division of “four seasons and eight seasonal points” satisfies the need for timekeeping and promotes social customs. Take Nanjing as an example. In ancient times, Nanjing was known for a variety of season-based folk activities, such as the kite-flying festival in spring; the pigeon-freeing fair in summer; the cricket-fighting championships in autumn; and the Chinese folk singing performance, the painting show, the lantern riddles contest, the poem society, the chess competition and the “warm-winter” gathering in winter.<sup>②</sup> Some festivals were endowed with special customs. For example, the Beginning of Spring was the day for having spring pancakes and the cattle-whipping rite; the Fresh Green (*Qingming*) was the day for having sweet green rice balls and flying kites; the Summer Solstice was the day for having noodles, weighing the old and the young and presenting cooling gifts; the Winter Solstice was the day for having wonton and painting the “Double-nine Diagram.” These activities all exhibited the 24 Solar Terms’ enrichment and promotion of social customs and folkways.

The application of the 24 Solar Terms in the areas of culture, agricultural production and social life demonstrates the natural cohesion of views on time-space, life and customs, which also indicates

their purpose of guiding practice and to some extent demonstrates the cultural structure of their application.

### 3. The cultural structure of traditional festivals

There are similarities and differences between traditional Chinese festivals and the 24 Solar Terms. The similarities lie in the fact that part of the 24 Solar Terms can be developed into festivals through cultural enrichment. This can be well exemplified by the Beginning of Spring, the Fresh Green and the Winter Solstice. The differences lie in folk function and cultural structure, with traditional festivals richer and more integral than the 24 Solar Terms in terms of diversity and wholeness.

#### 3.1 The connotations of folk festivals

The connotations of folk festivals concern beliefs, rites, language, symbols, diets, and art. They are combined to form a sound and complete cultural structure in which these individual aspects are interdependent.

Beliefs, as strong inner feelings, originate from natural religion, artificially-founded religion, witchcraft, as well as the life faith that evolves from the former three. Beliefs tend to be the dominant factor of a festival’s folk customs and are a key utilitarian objective that drives the continuation of festival activities. For example, the first day of the second lunar month is the Zhonghe Festival, which was believed to be the “birthday of the sun.” On that day ancient Chinese people worshiped the God of the Sun with paper horses, pancakes and “sun-cakes” and presented a black bag of various cereals and fruits to friends as a gift, which symbolized a good

① In *Odes of Tang, Classic of Poetry*—Ruan Yuan’s explanatory notes and commentaries of Thirteen Classics with punctuation marks. (1980). Zhonghua Book Company, p. 361.

② Chen, 2008

harvest. At the Qixi Festival, people worshiped the stars of Cowherd and Girl-weaver by holding a range of activities, such as catching spiders, exhibiting stitch-works and embroideries, admiring the moon's shadow, collecting night dew (signifier of Girl-weaver's teardrops), and tinting nails red to wish for becoming skillful, elegant and beautiful. On Mid-autumn Day, women would worship "Candra-prabha" with melons and fruits, and everybody would worship and admire the full moon, which symbolized reunion and happiness. A family get-together was held under the moonlight, with people eating, drinking, chatting and eulogizing the full moon. Evidently, the celestial totem served as a key support of these festival customs.

Rites, with stylized motions and whole-process activities, serve folk customs. The dances, dramas and other performing art that rites involve can help create a festival atmosphere and attract a crowd. Many festival activities (i. e. the Nuo dance on New Year's Eve, the dragon lantern and lantern parade on New Year's Day, the cattle-whipping rite on the Beginning of Spring, the tomb-sweeping and ancestor worshiping on the Fresh Green day) were important events that displayed a festival atmosphere, and which might be joyous, solemn or reverent in a dynamic way.

Language is the tool for expression and interpersonal communications. Special terms are also festival components which are used to enhance a sense of ceremony. For example, blessings like "May you be happy and prosperous," "All the best in the New Year" and "Wish you a successful and plentiful new year" have always been associated with the Spring Festival (also known as the Chinese New Year) while common sayings such as "Those who do not plant willow trees on the Fresh Green day shall have their souls reincarnated in the bodies

of yellow dogs" have been frequently heard during the Fresh Green period.<sup>①</sup> Thus it can be seen that language can also serve as a special carrier of festival culture.

Symbols refer to an iconic mark. Most traditional Chinese festivals are endowed with their own unique symbols. As iconic marks, festival symbols can easily arouse nostalgic feelings and enhance people's desire for family affections and festival celebrations. Such symbols (i.e. Spring Festival couplets & firecrackers for the Chinese New Year; cattle for the Beginning of Spring; willow for the Fresh Green; dragon boat for the Dragon Boat Festival, etc.) have more significance than its "state of matter" and have been with profound cultural connotations.

Diets refer to traditional specialty foods and beverages, which comfort nostalgic souls while enhancing the festival atmosphere. In fact, a festival diet does not feature delicacies from land and sea but includes items with auspicious meaning and beautiful legends which are combined to form the organic part of the festival's culture. Particularly in times of material deprivation, festival foods and beverages were the primary reason for kids to look forward to the coming of new year and other traditional festivals. More specifically, spring pancakes were for the Beginning of Spring, sweet green rice balls for the Fresh Green, noodles for the Beginning of Summer, water melons for the Beginning of Autumn and wonton for the Winter Solstice, all of which were season-specific and cultural-loaded.

Art is an indispensable part of folk festivals and includes various forms of folk performances (dance, drama, etc.), folk plastic art (painting, design, decoration, etc.) and oral traditions (myth, legend, story, ballad, etc.). The existence of art in the cultural structure brings aesthetic satisfaction.

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① Xia, 2006



More importantly, it demonstrates optimism, progressiveness and confidence that make hard things simple. Such art forms are designed to raise the profile of folk Suishi festivals though an artistic approach. Typical examples are performing dramas, sedan-chair dances, paper-cutting on the day of the Beginning of Spring, egg-decorating and kite-making on the day of the Fresh Green, and “Double-nine Diagram” painting on the day of the Winter Solstice.

### 3.2 The cultural elements behind the solar terms’ transformation to festivals

Festival connotations concern the six basic elements of beliefs, rites, language, symbols, diets

and art, and are exhibited in “festival tokens,” “festival events,” “festival messages,” “festival symbols,” “festival food” and “festival art forms.” Thus, festivals feature fixed and periodic occurrence and multi-channel cultural inheritance. Traditional Chinese festivals, with a sound and complete cultural structure, are different from the 24 Solar Terms in terms of function and form. Gradually, some solar terms served more than their initial purpose of guiding agricultural production and were applied to folk life, where they featured the cultural elements of “festival tokens,” “festival events,” “festival messages,” “festival symbols,” “festival food” and “festival art forms.” It was not until then



cattle whipping

that relevant solar terms were transformed into traditional festivals, which were then combined to form a festival system. Of all the 24 Solar Terms, the Beginning of Spring, the Fresh Green and the Winter Solstice already had a festival structure and therefore became folk festivals.

In terms of festival tokens, given that farm cattle in spring symbolized a bumper harvest, good fortune and great prosperity, customs such as cattle touching and cattle grabbing were performed on the Beginning of Spring day. As the willow signifies a sentiment of missing and features early budding and superb vitality, customs including willow tree planting and willow leaf wearing were practiced by ancient Chinese on the Fresh Green day to mark their missing of late loved ones and a wish for their early resurrection. On the Winter Solstice day, with the sun returning to the north, the custom of stove building was practiced by people to stand for retaining the Yang energy (warmth).<sup>①</sup>

In terms of festival events, previously on the Beginning of Spring day, the county magistrate was supposed to participate in “cattle whipping.” To be specific, he would go along a prescribed route to the grounds outside the east city gate, where he would whip the cattle three times before others did so in turn. On the day of the Fresh Green, people would pay a visit to the graves of their deceased family members, sweeping their tombs, weeding, filling earth and offering sacrifices. They took turns to worship their deceased ones according to the seniority among family members. Ancestor-worshipping was also performed at noon of the Winter Solstice, followed by a family dinner in the evening. In ancient Nanjing, there were also

such “winter-welcoming” rites as lighting a wood-burning stove and worshipping the Heaven and Earth.

In terms of festival messages, there were numerous proverbs and ballads. Typical examples are: Whipping cattle on the day of the Beginning of Spring, people swarmed to touch the hoofs of the cattle while saying. “Touching the hoofs of cattle in spring brings you tangible fortune during the rest of the year.” “Those who do not plant willow trees on the day of Fresh Green shall have their souls reincarnated in the bodies of yellow dogs” was frequently heard during the Fresh Green period. Approaching the Winter Solstice, people began to recite the “song of nine nine-days,” according to which “for the first and second nine-days, it is too freezing to take your hands out of your pockets.”

In terms of festival symbols, farming cattle symbolized the Beginning of Spring; willow branches represented the Fresh Green; stove fire signified the Winter Solstice.

In terms of festival foods, spring pancakes and spring rolls were for the Beginning of Spring; sweet green rice balls, green clams and Zitui buns were for the Fresh Green, and bean curd and wonton were for the Winter Solstice.

In terms of festival art forms, for the Beginning of Spring, there were activities such as performing dramas, sedan-chair dances, swallow paper-cutting, spring song singing and the Bayi dance of Yunqiao.<sup>②</sup> For the Fresh Green, there were egg painting, egg carving and kite painting. For the Winter Solstice, there were “Double-nine”-themed poems & painting gatherings and “Double-nine Diagram” painting competitions (the sketching of Chinese character strokes or winter sweet petals).

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① Pan, 2006. Proverb: “It is recommended to build a stove on the Winter Solstice.”

② “Yi” refers to “row” in ancient Chinese dance and “Bayi” (eight rows) was only used in dance for the Emperor. Even so, the Nuo dance, a type of Bayi dance, is still practiced in the suburb of Nanjing. Tao, 2015



Thus, solar terms such as the Beginning of Spring, the Fresh Green and the Winter Solstice have extended their influence in the areas of beliefs, rites, language, symbols, diets and art and have been endowed with a structure of folk festival and specific presentations. Therefore, they can be deemed as traditional festivals, as well as solar terms.

#### 4. Conclusion

“Solar terms” and “traditional festivals” form a contrastive pair of cultural concepts which are different from yet related to each other. The Solar terms are based on ancient observations of nature and the universe; while traditional festivals are mainly to satisfy social needs. The Solar terms have formed a timing system primarily serving agricultural production; while the traditional festivals have formed a cultural system designed to enrich national life. The terms belong to the solar calendar; while the festivals were derived from a mixture of the lunar and solar calendars. Given their respective functions and applications, traditional Chinese festivals outperform the 24 Solar Terms in terms of cultural structure.

The cultural association and application of the 24 Solar Terms are studied in the areas of philosophy, farming, society, etc. and are exhibited at the levels of spirit, production and life with a focus on the natural convergence of views on space and time,

life and customs, and the facilitation of agricultural practices. In a scientific and practical way, they have actively integrated into the agricultural culture of China and have become a booster of the seasonal culture.

Traditional Chinese festivals in this paper mainly refer to folk events which concern beliefs, rites, language, symbols, diets, and art, etc. and are combined to form a sound and complete cultural structure in which these individual aspects are interdependent respectively concerning spiritual guidance, stylized movements, expressions & communications, iconic indications, folk food, as well as performances & designs that highlight beauty and confidence. These six elements have been included in the Chinese solar terms and seasonal change-related culture.

Festival connotations concern the six basic elements of beliefs, rites, language, symbols, diets and art, and are exhibited in the co-existent “festival tokens,” “festival events,” “festival messages,” “festival symbols,” “festival food” and “festival art forms.” Thus, festivals feature fixed and periodic occurrences and multi-channel cultural inheritances. Three solar terms featuring all these elements, i.e. the Beginning of Spring, the Fresh Green and the Winter Solstice have been transformed into traditional Chinese festivals, thus integrating solar terms and traditional festivals into an organic whole.

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